

Nya
By
Joey Hill

Nya Background/Biography for Alhambra Site

SUMMARY: Nya is a young woman who was raised from birth by the ARM faction and her own family to be a fighter and assassin in the service of their causes. In one of her trips to the survivalist camps, she was bitten by an ocelot, and so she has become a were, but her ARM chapter felt that could make her a further asset to their organization, to infiltrate were and vampire circles. However, as the posts will make clear, there is the potential within her to switch sides, and she is strongly drawn to Namir and his lover Maeve, due to several factors, not the least of which is she is the reincarnation of Bedivere.

ORIGINAL NYA BIO

Character Name: Nya

Writer: Joey Hill

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Age (writer): 33

Character Age: 21

Nature: Lycanthrope (ocelot)

Description: Dark sable sleek hair and wide dark eyes, pale skin that tends to freckle. Slim, boyish body, mostly angles and muscle. If she would ease up on her training regimen and eat food occasionally for pleasure as well as sustenance, she would fill into a soft, womanly figure, not overly endowed but pleasing nonetheless. She does not wear clothes for embellishment, only disguise, so when she is at "home", she wears only a black body suit for training purposes. If she goes out for general intelligence work, she generally wears the clothing of a teenage boy - baseball cap, loose shirt, baggy pants, clothes that can hide weaponry easily, and a sloppy teenage boy attracts little attention, more easily blends.

History: Nya was the only child to parents who are lifetime members of a fanatical, purist cell of ARM, so devoted they dedicated their daughter at birth to the desires of the Inner Circle. Nya showed an amazing aptitude for combat and so she was given extensive training, even beyond the boys 1) because of that aptitude and 2) because of her parents' blank check to the Inner

Circle for her to be honed into the tool they deem appropriate for their purposes. That amazing aptitude is a carryover from her former incarnation as Bedyvere, an identity she of course does not as yet recognize in herself.

Since she could walk she has been trained to fight the weres, vamps and other supernaturals. She's the type of person who can survive in the wilderness with a piece of string and a pocket knife, or can break down and put together a semi-automatic in record time. She recently was attacked by an ocelot when she was on a survivalist training mission in the woods. She did not realize she was infected with lycanthropy until she connected her increasingly strange behavior with the onset of the full moon and the attack.

She still lives at home under the watchful eyes of her parents, and so she approaches her mother, tells her what she thinks has happened, and asks what to do. Her mother decides she must be exterminated.

With the full moon upon her, and all the emotional changes that she does not understand and cannot control, Nya kills her mother in self

defense and then flees the house. That night is when she briefly sees Namir and Maeve for the first time (see Nya Intro Post). When she recovers from her Shift, she wakes up deep in the rural wooded area outside of Port Hope, at the doorstep of a derelict stone chapel, almost as if in her subconscious she was seeking an ARM sanctuary. She has found one. The chapel is a secret rendezvous point for a cell of ARM close to the Inner Circle (which executes some of the acts of violence they vigorously deny supporting). This cell is run by a were named Cassius, one of those voluntarily infected to serve the greater cause of ARM (obviously a cell whose existence is unknown to the purist group to which Nya's parents belonged).

Cassius takes her in, convinces Nya she can still serve ARM and the Inner Circle effectively. He teaches her some about being a were, but underscores all his lessons with the perspective that lycanthropy is an abomination that has damned her, unless by some luck she can offer enough service to ARM to win her a spot in purgatory.

Abilities: She has almost inhuman discipline over

her body and her emotions. She is double-jointed in her back, hands, and elbows. She has the ability to self-hypnotize, "program" her mind so its intent can only be found by a Master on a deep probe. She can snap herself back to her motive with a trigger she anticipates encountering on her mission. The danger is if something goes wrong with that trigger, she could be stuck in the persona of her self-hypnosis indefinitely.

As indicated under Description, she is slim and boyish, much like the ocelot - small and fierce, with delicate features that could pass for a beautiful young boy as much as a young woman (makes it easy for her to disguise herself as male when needed). The capability to do the former was cultivated by her family, who pushed her to dress as a boy and act in the aggressive manner of one, but ARM also trained her to have the mannerisms of a woman when that disguise was needed. She is a chameleon, able to assume the personalities and expressions of the people in her environment. She can be almost invisible in a room of people, merely a shadow of a person someone vaguely remembers being there later.

Weaknesses: Her lack of identity is as much a

weakness to her as a strength, for it is when someone taps into an area that requires her to have her own unique identity that she gets off stride, because that part of her is walled off. Since her Change she has periods of confusion, where she loses herself in visions and memories, flashes of intense emotional anguish. This weakness is also what can save her from turning into a complete sociopath. When she lost Arthur/Guinevere, she was so close to them it shattered some part of her mind, such that in each lifetime she is unconsciously looking for them, but up until now, she ends up serving those who want just the opposite - for Arthur and Guinevere never to return. The confusion manifests itself in dreams, or moments of disorientation, and of course the lycanthropy, becoming one of the things she was taught was an abhorrence, will both make it harder to control the disorientation and more likely that she'll finally understand who she/he is? At heart she is a frightened child, fighting in a woman's body with a woman's identity and is struggling to find out which way to go. Something is close to breaking.

Personality: She has devastatingly tempting erotic potential in her absolute innocence; she has

seen and experienced so many types of violence, but has spent no time enjoying leisure activities, exploring pleasures with others, etc, even the pleasure of choosing clothes for herself, or earrings. She is not pierced, has never worn makeup for the sheer fun of it, etc. She's been trained to withstand torture, the training administered by her own father until he convinced himself she could bear almost any pain without capitulating.

It is her bond to Maeve and Namir and the other Knights of the Round Table that can bring her to herself again. At the start, she really has no personality. When she is alone, she is focused on the next mission. Her discipline and training do not allow her any interests beyond that which needs to be learned to accomplish the goal. If she has any hobby, it is to continually train, teach her body to use its strengths with perfect precision to do what she is told to do. She is Loyalty in human form. Once she rediscovers her King and his Queen, her focus will be on demonstrating her love and service to them in whatever way is required.

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Nya Post 1 – Fugitive

Characters: Nya, Namir and Maeve

Writer(s): Joey

Time: June, late evening

Location: Alleyway along the streets of Port Hope, close to Scheherezade's.

Shadows speared the alleyway, thrown by the couple who paused at its mouth, drawn to a halt by the urgent cacophony of sirens closing in on the block. Nya sat motionless, wanting to hunch back against the wall, wanting to tremble and sob, but noise and movement betrayed presence.

From a lifetime of weekends spent in the ARM survivalist camps, she knew it was better to stay motionless if you were caught without adequate cover, rather than to bolt and draw a predator's attention.

Fingers of cold dread dug cruelly into her vitals at the thought. While training had planted that knowledge in her head, her instinct to obey it at this moment came from the new animal part of her, the stillness of the ocelot as it waited to see if it could run or would be forced to fight. She could almost feel the claws starting to extend

from her fingers. As the two people shifted into sharper focus, she knew a mirror at this moment would reveal herself with the iridescent gold eyes of the cat and a moon of pupil.

The man turned to speak to the woman, his fingers brushing the small of her back, lying easily on the curve of hip. Nya stiffened as the movement brought their scent to her.

He was dead, a vamp, but it was more than that which made her muscles tighten in resistance. He called to her kind...no! Not her kind, this thing that had taken her over. The cats belonged to him, served him.

She had an overwhelming, tearing need to scramble out of the alley and go to him, lay herself across his feet and wait for his bidding, ask for his protection. She, who had been trained relentlessly to kill his kind.

That infinitesimal stiffening brought her to their attention. They both spun. It was a strange moment, as they both tried to step forward to protect one another and only ended up advancing together and bumping shoulders. They resolved it the same way they had told her to do it in camp, shifting side by side, giving the predator two

targets to face instead of one. Only now she was seen as the predator. Nya snarled in a sound half-feral, half-human and stood, lifting the small crossbow from under her coat. Her finger twitched on the release. It could fire a succession of ten silver-tipped, wooden shafts. And within 500 feet, she never missed. He was a vamp, and if the woman was with him, letting him touch her, she had no rights. Nya could kill them.

Now that they were facing her, they were familiar...from the news? Her swirling mind, caught between forest haunts and the memory of her sparse bedroom, now soaked in her mother's blood and body parts, tried to place them. Maybe they were people from TV, they were both beautiful.

Or maybe it was something else...

Or maybe, feeling the strong tug again as she looked at the man, she had served them, knelt before them, felt a sword touch her...his? shoulder, and pledged all heart, body and soul to the man who held it and the woman who stood at his side. She had been a warrior of innate, exceptional skill whose loyalty to them was unswerving, so unswerving that the loss of them

and of their dream, had destroyed her.

Nya staggered under the instantaneous, powerful flash of memory as she tried to hold the crossbow steady on the vamp and his date. The roaring, unfamiliar call of the cat must be bringing these strange well of images inside her. She had spells of confusion, this was not the first, but these images felt more like revelation than creation, the opening of a door in her heart that had been sealed for an eternity. Confusion had ruled her for so long, kept the lock in place through many lives before this one, because her heart had broken when she had lost them.

A fierce screech erupted from her throat as the unfamiliar thoughts and overwhelming emotions that attended them broke her tenuous thread of control. The weapon fell useless from her hands and she landed upon it, twisting, writhing and Changing.

A sleek, small golden cat with intricately fitted black markings running along her sides and back sprang to her feet, tripping on the crossbow's release and sending several arrows hammering into the alley's brick wall. She backed up, spitting and hissing at it and at the two poised in the

alleyway. Her wide and frightened eyes measured her avenues of escape.

The man drew the woman to the side, gesturing forward in a compassionate movement. Even more unexpected was the sudden flash in her brain, the image of the nearest cover, a copse of woods in a nearby park. A small cat could hide and feed safely there, and the compass to it imprinted itself on her senses with a tranquilizing touch that reassured and commanded her to follow its bidding at the same time.

The ocelot yowled unhappily, sprang forward, dodged past them, and plunged into the night.

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Nya Post 2 – How to Kill Namir

Characters: Nya

Writer(s): Joey

Time: Late July

Location: Nya's Home in the Marsh

Mentions: Namir, Maeve

Nya slowly lowered her body until the crown of her head touched the floor. She pushed herself back up gradually, holding the tension in her

muscles necessary to maintain the handstand. She walked ten handsteps to the scratched card table that constituted her kitchen and folded her legs back, adjusting the angle of her hips so that she created a C-shaped bend of her upside-down body to pick up the semi-automatic with her bare feet. She straightened her legs, shifted the gun onto the shallow basin of her left sole, then shuddered to slide it down her legs, roll it over her hips and bring it to rest in the valley of her spine. She steadied her breathing, which registered the strain, then lifted one hand from the ground. Holding her body up with one locked arm, she reached back with her free hand and retrieved the gun, taking it to the floor and balancing both palms on it.

Drawing out the burn, she curled her knees downward, into her chest, then slid into a squat, her knees lined up against the weapon.

Tell me how to kill Namir.

Cassius's orders had come from higher up, of course. Based on the importance of the mission, she suspected the directive came from the highest level, but those shadowy figures were hardly important to her. The mission was all that

mattered.

He had known she was the one who could do it, who could provide the answer. Namir and the Fey red-headed witch who was now his lover had seen her at her worst. Something moved in her, flustered at the thought, and she let that go, not examining it, simply letting it move through her and then back into her unconscious where it would not distract her from her charge.

Nya hadn't known the secret of doing that back when she was in the alley. She had not known she could use the mental discipline ingrained in her from the moment she could walk to help her to channel a were's powerful emotions into tools. She had fought the passions she did not understand that night, the sweat slicked on her body, her limbs trembling, and she had lost control to the beast. But it was not the cat that had killed her mother. She had. She had been taught never to make excuses. She was always to blame for failure.

She had learned from intelligence masters, but had surpassed them, because she had come to them as an empty vessel, no distractions. Her parents had dedicated her to the Inner Circle of

ARM at birth, and while she had lived with her parents during that time, it had been the relationship of drill sergeants to soldiers, nothing more important than the training or the cause it served. She had never played with a doll, never watched a television show except as a device to gather information. Her slim form and expressive face had given her the powers of a chameleon. She could be twelve or twenty-five, teenage boy or young woman. She wore clothes as an expression of her disguises, and had never chosen clothes for embellishment or decoration. She was a tool, and a tool had no thought of decorating itself. When she was between orders, she simply wore the black bodysuit best for training and weapons practice. Since she served as an undercover agent for ARM the organization did not know where she lived. It was the way of life she practiced, and they understood its necessity. A person with a base of operations could be identified, become familiar. She had never even attended a church, for it would compromise her cover to be seen with ARM members.

Not even her father knew where she was most of the time, not that he cared any longer. She had failed him. To him, she was dead. She had locked

that pain away a long time ago and did not think about it anymore. Anything that would disturb her dispassionate calm could attract the attention of a supernatural, so that pain had been simply carved off her consciousness and deposited into the void inside her. It was the cavern where most people kept the normal clutter of emotions and thoughts caused by busy, varied lives. She had plenty of storage space there.

Her dedication gave her no sense of pride. She had forfeited the right to pride, to anything, when she had allowed herself to be attacked by an ocelot with lycanthropy. How could her father see her with anything but hate? She had killed her mother on her first Change, that night two months ago, when she had fled her home and crouched in an alleyway, the smell of her mother's blood upon her. She was useful to ARM still; a trained weapon now with a were's senses and strength, though unfortunately an ocelot's strength was not much greater than her own. Another failure. ("If you were going to let yourself be attacked," Cassius said impatiently, "Why not by a cougar?") Nya was well aware that she was expendable, worth less than nothing to ARM if she failed, and she deserved nothing if she succeeded but another

chance to redeem her unredeemable sin. The ocelot had not had the strength to kill a human, but a trained assassin who had relinquished control to an animal's primitive reactions had more than adequate strength to beat an adult woman to death. She was one of the demon children now, and she would be used, but not included.

The event in the alley gave her an edge, on several levels, and because it did, she replayed the memory in her head, studying each detail of it and evaluating it for a fit with the puzzle she was putting together in her mind. Namir and the woman would remember her, remember a frightened young woman new to her lycanthropy. She could use that, and her knowledge of the Lord of the Alhambra. Since that night, when she was not focused on missions, she had studied him, his interests, his developing relationship with Maeve Desmond, his movements, the aerial layout of the forest preserve and all its holdings, the reports of other operatives. If she had been anyone else, it would have been called a hobby, the first she had ever indulged in her life. But inside, it was as if she had known Cassius's question and the mission it represented was

coming.

Something was coming.

That flicker again, harder to let go this time without snagging it with a reaction, but she managed it. The point was not trying to get into the Alhambra undetected. That was fairly impossible. She knew it and the forest preserve were heavily warded. No one got past the guards at the bridge gates without an invitation. There would be no undetected entries. Namir was a 1200-year-old vampire, entirely capable of turning a human mind inside out to learn about hidden motives. But he was rumored to be soft about taking advantage of that, if he had no reason to suspect a person's intent. He had some guards also capable on a lesser scale of mind probes.

The point was only to appear as if she was trying to get in undetected. And she had the way to do it, as well as the motivation that would stand up under fairly close scrutiny, thanks to that night in the alley.

Her gaze flickered to the news clipping from the social column, littering the floor with all her other research. A roach rested on it, and they stared at

one another a moment. Nya knew what the print said, and so let him be. While Lord Namir had no interest in advertising his private parties, the social columnists sold their souls to print the slightest tidbit of information. On Lammas night, personal guests and invitees of Lord Namir would gather for a celebration of the First Harvest pagan holiday on his forest preserve, a tremendous outdoor feast. It would be a little over two weeks to the full moon, so she should be fairly safe from unexpected Change, unless something went terribly wrong, or she allowed the air full of pheromones from the lycanthropes to push her over. The latter could be a blessing, in that senses might not be as sharp to detect threats. Even so, she would have to self-hypnotize, assume a persona to blend with them. That meant she would have to embrace the teetering edge of control that could knock her over into a Change, but the risk was acceptable. She would not be the only were in danger of changing that night, inspired by the rampant energies of the erotic celebration. If she did change, it would only underscore her inexperience and win her more trust, where she could position herself to use her far more deadly human skills.

She did not know how her ability to self-hypnotize would react with a Change. That was a problem. However, again, she judged it an acceptable risk. She might be an inexperienced were, but she had a brutal level of discipline as a trained assassin and covert agent that could compensate.

"An excuse for an unholy orgy," Cassius had muttered, when she had reported her idea to him. The revelry would most likely offer bonfires, dancing, feasting, and personal creations of the Great Rite all over the island. She had pointed out it would be a perfect time to accomplish her goal.

"It will be absolutely symbolic," he agreed. "Slain during the observation of one of their pagan rituals." His lip curled. "It can only help our cause, to rid the world of this Satan's spawn masquerading as civilized creatures. Namir is a magnet to humans, making them believe that their presence in our midst is acceptable. And I find it somewhat ironic," he chuckled, "that the symbolism of this particular pagan holiday includes a king-killing."

Nya had nodded blankly. She didn't think much

about the cause. She was sworn to serve it, that was all, a meager hope for her damned soul.

Tell me how to kill Namir.

She had told him how. He had agreed after consulting with the Inner Circle, and they had charged her with the task. She did not question their motives, for she had no right to do anything but follow orders. She would simply serve until she was killed, and then she suspected she would sleep or burn. Her mother and father had believed the latter. Neither option held a great deal of interest for her.

Nya slept sitting up, her palms still resting on the gun.

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Nya Post 3 – Avoiding Security

Characters: Nya, Carlos, Raquel, Amy

Writer(s): Joey

Time: August 1 - Lammas, mid-evening

Location: Waters around Alhambra Forest Preserve

Mentions: Namir, Sasha

The sun was setting, turning the Maine waters to

mellow blue silk touched with fire as Nya propelled the skiff through them toward the Alhambra islands in the Casco Bay. Day tripper traffic, rented skiffs coming in from their attempts to fish the cool Maine waters, were mostly going in the opposite direction, though she saw a couple fancy yachts headed toward the harbor on one side of Namir's island, where legitimate guests might drop an anchor.

She paused just before the invisible line where she suspected the wards were cast and idled the boat against the current. A sense of unease had dogged her ever since she had started planning the final details of this task, as if there was a fundamental flaw in the plan. She had gone over every step of it, a thousand times easily, and then back over it a thousand more. She had looked at every potential for error and worked through how she would compensate for it. The unease remained, so she had eventually just boxed it into a neutral part of her mind. Now that the task was just ahead, she was having some minor and surprising difficulty keeping it there. Perhaps it was the beast in her. It often brought her strange feelings. Like this sudden yearning, as she sat just outside the wards, that she belonged inside them. The yearning was

the magic being generated on the island, she reasoned. But it was more than the magic. It was a sense of destiny and change...of home.

Nya took several deep breaths, centered herself, and focused on what was necessary. It started the countdown that would fold every aspect of her personality into her persona through self-hypnosis. The character she would be was close to the truth, an inexperienced were, a kitten, a lost girl with no training, no family, no direction. The other self, the warrior, the tool of ARM, was gently pushed back into her unconscious as the meditation took her into the trance.

Years of training under the best in ARM had helped her learn the art of programming her mind so it would reveal little or confuse a non-Master vampire of moderate age. A master could get into her mind, but he'd have to go to her sub or unconscious to find the layers of danger, because she easily could fill the forefront of her consciousness to screen her real intent, her focus unwavering. She filled that forefront now with the memories of being home from college, a new were, uncertain of her powers, taking a sabbatical.

She likewise filled it with memories of that night in the alleyway and locked those thoughts into place. It was best to stick close to the truth. The key to preparing her mind to be around supernaturals was not in blocking out all the extraneous activities that surrounded her mission, but accepting the environment into her, the mannerisms and emotions of those around her so it camouflaged her as well as her intent. With her exceptional ability to program her mind, she buried deep in her unconscious a trigger, a laundry list of certain elements that, when assembled, would snap her back to duty at the right moment.

She had taught her mind to do what military minds had sought to do with drugs and implant chips for fifty years, because she had nothing but time with which to develop it. The quivering apprehension of a young girl swept through her even as the last vestiges of herself throttled the motor back up. What was she doing here? Was she out of her mind? Her beast felt the wards the minute she crossed through them. She shot toward a cove on the beach that was screened by rocks and vegetation that she had marked out as the perfect hiding place. The way was difficult, the

surf more inclined to pummel than to glide her in, and she killed the motor, lifted it free of the water and used her oars to maneuver the boat into the shelter and keep it off the rocks.

It jerked onto the bottom, one side scraping against a jagged protrusion of rock. Nya leaped out, fought the tide and pulled the boat far enough up that the waters could not reclaim it. She had come in at high tide, so it should be safe where she'd placed it, barring any sudden freak storms.

She heard laughter and screams. She had intentionally been late, knowing it would be easier to fall in with the movement of the others once the celebrations were well under way, but her hope that the magic would have waned was unrealized. If anything, the power raised by the rite was being carried by the increased revelry of the participants. It drifted through the air and surrounded her like a warm, comforting cloak, whispering promises and hopes of new beginnings, stirring strange feelings in her breast.

She caught the first scent of the island security, a smell of authority and danger, and took off out of the cove, her wet canvas sneakers finding a path through the thick underbrush only because they

were aided by the cat grace that had come with her lycanthropy, her body twisting, turning, ducking, keeping the bag close to her body.

She could smell the pride closing in, felt their anger, their offense, and knew the fine dagger's edge she would dance between achieving her goal and being torn apart. She stumbled and heard a snarl, not more than three lengths behind her.

She spun, landing on her knees, enough of an animal to know she mustn't appear a threat, and threw up her hands in defense, the bag still in them, a pitiful shield. "Don't hurt me! Please! Don't!"

She felt them close in on all sides, warm furry bodies, muscle, sex, power and magic. When she opened her eyes, however, peering up at them from her cowering position on the ground, she saw a group of men and women, some in the dark embroidered shirts that marked them as security. She had no doubt the one standing directly before her, who had cut her off first, was the leader of the detail.

She was a small woman, and used to women as well as men being taller than she was. The man towering over her studied every aspect and

nuance of her posture and expression and held her in place with the warning that lay in that alertness. His dark, close cropped hair gleamed ebony in the crescent moonlight. The dark security clothing fit his lean body well, the short sleeves of the combed cotton shirt stretched over sexy, toned biceps that promised he hadn't been a pushover before his change. Becoming a were always put something of the animal in one's human features, if you knew how to look for it, and his face, with its sculpted Latin good looks and a tinge of arrogance, called forth a comparison to the mind almost instantly of the jaguar that lurked behind the rich, coffee brown eyes.

Her body reacted to him instantly, tightening in a way that was not really remarkable, given the level of pheromones rushing through the air and the beast hovering so close to her frightened conscious, but her eyes lingered on him all the same. Definitely were. And a powerful one.

"You're trespassing, kitten," he said, in a voice that, despite its sternness, stroked her nerve endings like velvet with a Latin rhythm. The currents stirring in the night were definitely doing their work.

She pushed that aside to note that, though he was firm and admonishing, he was responding to her fear, not exceeding what was necessary to cow an already frightened captive.

"I know, I'm sorry...I'm so sorry." She started to stand on visibly quivering legs, then collapsed back down at a warning hiss behind her. The whites of her eyes showed as they darted about her.

She was fully in the persona now, had no thought except that she had made a mistake, that they looked fully capable of tearing her apart if she made the wrong move. However, they also looked like a trained security detail, in control of the situation and themselves in a way laughable next to her tenuous grasp on the signs of her own transformation.

"I.I just wanted to come here," she quavered, trying to still the pathetic trembling in her voice. She didn't want to seem like a sniveling fool in front of him, before all of them. "I'm twenty-one, and I just don't know anyone...I came home from college, and I don't fit in here. My parents are with ARM, and they just didn't understand.when it happened. My family, my friends... They

don't... They don't act like I'm real, or normal, and I thought I could come here, just for tonight, and maybe feel different. Just for one lousy night."

She remembered the feeling all too well, it was so easy to draw on it, but the truth was far more horrible than she could discuss, and that was in her voice, too. They were around her, a threat, but she also felt their kinship with her, the sense of belonging, the warm affection between cats of the same pride, a belonging beyond her reach and yet right here, underscoring her isolation. She didn't belong here. Only tragedy could attend her presence, and spoiling this for them would be another sin, one she couldn't bear.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "If you'll just let me get back to my boat, I'll go." Where had that thought come from? A disturbance flitted through her conscious. She wasn't supposed to tell them about the boat. Someone was supposed to have dropped her off.

"Stay put." The unsmiling man unclipped a radio from his belt, lifted it. "Sasha, we have an uninvited and untrained...guest."

His emphasis on the word was enough to keep her

watching him warily.

"My Lord Namir is being informed of your presence," he said. "Do not move." A moment later, she felt why.

It swept through her, that dangerous simultaneous sense of possession and service that she had felt in the alleyway toward Namir. It was his call to her kind, but even deeper than that, it was the memory of a bond that tugged open the door to a deep longing in her. It was almost enough to break her focus, create that opening that would attract the notice of a vampire's probe like a beacon on a dark moor.

He did not disappoint, the probe swiveling immediately toward the ripple. She opened herself further to the feeling, wanting his touch to remain within her, though it filled her with a conflicting response of quivering terror and bittersweet yearning. She was back in the alley, where she had been in control of nothing, only seeking sanctuary where there was none to be found.

She had attributed that overwhelming sense of home and family, the most terrifying quicksand of all, to the other horrible events of that night. She

was unprepared for the touch of his mind to bring them all back again, more powerfully because this time the touch of his mind was intentionally delving, enhancing the sense of being wrapped in a warm blanket and pulled closer, wanted, welcomed.

A small part of her was disturbed. She was slipping toward Truth, her subconscious floundering, the anchor points of the self-hypnosis starting to weaken, confusing her mind further. Then, a moment before she knew something was going to go very wrong, the probe slowly withdrew from the womb of her consciousness, leaving her bereft. She stood there, trembling, unsure of anything, as the man spoke into the radio again. He slid it back to his belt and then extended a hand that could enclose both of hers.

"My lord remembers you, little one. He finds you...intriguing, and bids you welcome, but before we will permit you to join the others, you must be searched. If you do not agree to do that, you must go."

She extended the duffel in her arms for answer. "I'm Nya," she said uncertainly.

"Nya, welcome to Alhambra. I am Carlos. You

will tell me where your boat is."

"In the cove, back there," she said.

He jerked his head at another of the guards, a Brazilian woman. "Raquel, find it, search it." He lifted out the small bundle of clothes, shifting through the drawstring trousers, loose shirt and a worn leather scabbard for a carved wooden eating knife. "No ribbons or corsets?" he observed.

"Such a wealth of lovely medieval garb available to a girl to wear to a festival, and you choose the garb of a peasant boy. Do you have an identity crisis, Nya?"

Her stomach dropped, but he didn't seem to expect an answer. "No weapons here," he stated. "Stand up."

She rose, her hands nervously twisting together. His gaze passed over the other members of the security detail and paused on one not much older than Nya. Her blonde hair and toned body practically announced California transplant, but her attractive features did not detract from the stern set to her mouth and eyes.

"Please search her, Amy."

The were cougar instructed Nya in a quiet voice to spread her legs out and lift her arms to her sides. The man stood before her, not more than a foot away, his eyes following Amy's hands as they slid down and under Nya's arms, her shoulders, back, and armpits. Amy's fingers molded over Nya's small breasts, followed them down to her rib cage, to her hips. Nya was still quivering with nerves, but there was a strangely growing heat that joined the apprehension, as she watched the way his eyes followed the woman's motions, noting every detail of her body the woman's hands touched. Nya swallowed, knowing he would be quite aware of how his scrutiny and the woman's touch was affecting her, but nothing changed on his face, except a slight glimmer of interest in those dark eyes. Nya flushed as the woman's hands slid over her damp crotch.

"No shame, little one," the woman murmured. "It's the night. Lammas. None of us could help but be excited. It's normal for a were to have a heightened sexual awareness. Also, looking at Carlos," she smiled in the corner of Nya's vision, "Adds spice to that effect."

Her tone was gentle. Nya managed a jerky nod,

thrown off stride by the woman's unexpected kindness. She was used to being castigated about her beast, not reassured that what she felt was normal. A morass of emotions was threatening to swamp her. She seemed to be unlocking an abyss in herself she had not intended to open.

When the woman was done, Carlos nodded to her. "You can change over there with Amy," he nodded toward the rocks, with a brief glint of mischief in his expression, "unless you're not overly shy."

She wasn't sure if she was or not. There was something in the air, that strong scent of heat off the weres moving on the island, and something about his close, impersonal and yet not so impersonal regard, as the woman's hands had moved over her that made her uncertain.

Nevertheless, she moved to the cover of the rock, the woman at her side, to change into the peasant boy's tunic and trews. Her body and mind were unsettled by Namir, the moon, Carlos, why she was here.

When she emerged, he studied her curiously, then stepped forward, lightly touched her face with a fingertip, a firm, unrelenting touch, but not rough.

Nya raised her eyes to him, slid away. She was lost; if he could probe her, she was entirely vulnerable and exposed by Namir's previous search.

He didn't probe her. "Amy will take you to the party. Be careful and wise, kitten, and you will enjoy this night."

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Nya Post 4 – Lammass Continued

Characters: Nya, Namir and Maeve

Writer(s): Joey

Time: August 1

Location: Alhambra Forest Preserve

She could hear life stirring everywhere. It was not long before she and her guard merged into the back end of a group of excited young women, wolves by their scent. They noticed her as soon as a curve of the trail shifted her wind to them, but they easily drew her into the ranks as she adopted the same type of youthful exuberance. It was a night to embrace all living beings, enjoy the Web and all its strands.

The sneering comment from a vague source, "An

excuse for an orgy," flitted through her mind, but she found it inappropriate to the feeling of this place. She caught a brief glimpse of one couple in a secluded glade, the man's face reverent over the woman's, her expression passionate and joyous as she clung to him. The movements of his body seemed to be driving the energy around them higher and higher.

Nya understood about sex, of course. The immersion of the body in an unclean act to create new servants for God, much as one had to go through Purgatory to reach Heaven. The act had been described to her...by her parents? They had told her its power could turn the mind away from God. Seeing the two lovers through the trees, she perversely felt she was witnessing something spiritual.

She felt no real passion for the God of her parents. That was all right, because no one had ever asked for her enthusiasm, just her total commitment to the cause. Duty was her God, and that had always felt appropriate to her. Her sub-conscious reminded her that the gates of Heaven were closed to her now, anyway; she could only hope to do enough good deeds for the

Army of Righteous Men to warrant an eternal stay in Purgatory.

"Here's another kitten!"

Nya was pulled away from the strange thoughts by a litter of young felines, dressed in an array of festive garb, full skirts, peasant blouses and tightly laced corsets, their ears, throats and arms adorned with Celtic design jewelry. They were already being affected by the atmosphere, such that their eyes were changing to cat's eyes in their human faces.

"Come," two of the girls seized her by the arms while a third led the way, "Lord Namir has called for all his kittens!"

Amy left them then, and Nya let herself be borne along. Something rose in her throat at the thought of being in Namir's presence, choking off speech. Fortunately, her companions were too vigorously giggling and chattering to notice. Nya managed to adopt enough of their wide-eyed sparkling enthusiasm to avoid notice, but she could not loosen or explain the knot in her stomach.

They came to a clearing. A bonfire roared high under a sky jeweled with stars, and many

were-cats were already gathered around. Lord Namir was there with the red-headed witch, watching the young felines pair off with whoever caught their fancy, circling back to dance around him, rubbing deferentially against him while he laughed and enjoyed their play.

Being in his presence caused an immediate and overwhelming flood of need, and loss. She swayed unsteadily. Lord Namir's eyes fell upon her, and the lightest brush of his mind was overwhelming, increasing the sense of loyalty to him, until she didn't know whether to scream or weep, and was baffled by both reactions.

He did not invade as he could have, taking advantage of her abrupt vulnerability; apparently he had already probed her as much as he intended to. He merely raised his brow in an intrigued expression.

Nya tore her gaze from Namir and managed to stifle the whimper from the emotional rip it caused. She focused on the nearest thing to him, in more ways than one. His red-headed Fey witch.

Maeve looked at her with amused, curious blue eyes, and when their gazes met, Nya was rocked again by the connection, strong and threatening.

She shook her head, feeling like she had flies buzzing in it. She stumbled forward and ended up on one knee at Maeve's feet.

When she raised her head, it was as if she were a different person entirely. She offered her hand to the lady as if she were a lad in truth.

"Honor me with a dance, dear lady," Nya said hoarsely. She bowed slightly in Namir's direction, not meeting his eyes, caught between two selves in a dangerously exposed state, but she could not tell where the danger lay. Her identity was on a merry-go-round that was sliding up and down and spinning all at once so she couldn't get an anchor. She didn't know who was operating the ride or when she would be allowed to get off, or if she wanted to get off. "I shall safeguard her around the flames, my lord."

"She is a flame," the vampire said, bowing back, "And contains a burning passion that far exceeds what lies behind you. But I give her unto your keeping for a moment only, and will hold you to your oath."

Nya's knee buckled, such that she gripped Maeve's hand harder than expected. The witch reached out to steady her, a concerned look crossing her

brow. His words inflicted wounds on Nya's insides, battered her mind with confusing images and warring emotions.

She rose unsteadily and took the hand of the beautiful Maeve. The witch projected a sensuality so strong that Nya's blood stirred. When Maeve smiled at her, tears came to Nya's eyes, shocking them both.

She saw Maeve's face but different, an ancient time, and her eyes were sad, filled with the knowledge of her own failure...as Nya had failed them both. She remembered his sword...The Sword...lifting and throwing it into a pool of clear glass, along with her heart, for the man who had wielded it was taken away from her...because she wasn't worthy.

Nya seized onto the memory of that warrior, of his discipline and strength, because she needed it now. Her lord had given his lady unto her keeping and she must serve him well. Nya seized the woman's hands, kissed her impetuously on the mouth as one of the other young cats might, and pointed to the fire. "Ready, m'lady?"

They danced, and the confusion continued. Over and over, through feasting and revelry, through

the odd mixture of mundane and magic, past and present suggested by their surroundings, she saw them all. A long time ago, she had again clasped the cool fingers of the small woman with flame hair and they had danced. The man had watched, the flame reflected in his eyes, all of them caught up in a night meant to celebrate the passion of the Lord and Lady that confirmed the harvest for them all. Fires had dotted the hillsides, and the moon had rode low, as if loathe to draw away from the magic, or as if they had drawn Her down to join them.

There had been others there, too, other faces, like tonight. Nya remembered the touch of hands of those who accepted her, loved her, had loved her, vaguely felt them through the casual touches of the strangers around her tonight. They did not know her now, .so how could they really love her? How could they accept her? What was real?

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Nya Post 5 – Lammas Part 2

Characters: Nya, Namir and Maeve

Writer(s): Ben and Joey

Time: August 1

Location: Alhambra Forest Preserve

The kittens took her away from Namir and Maeve then, and she stayed with the felines for several hours, immersing herself in their play. However, she could not distract herself from the confusing desires of her own heart. She was compelled by them to leave the kittens, just after midnight, and seek out the Lord and his Lady again.

She came to a cave among the hills of the preserve. Inside the cavern, crystals in the rock caught the fire of torches mounted in the stone. They turned the walls into a glittering tapestry. It was like being inside of a diamond. The heart of the gem, the true source of its fire to her, stood in the center of the floor.

The two of them were waiting for her. For a moment, her eyes adjusted to the differences between light, dark, and dazzling. Then she saw that Namir stood with the woman before him. She leaned back against him, her body pressed to his, with his arms and the folds of his cloak crossed before her. When Nya moved out of the entrance shadows and into the light of the torches, his unearthly gaze riveted upon her, and a light smile touched his firm mouth. He slowly opened his

arms. He had held the flame-haired woman's crossed wrists in his grasp with the edges of the cloak, so when he slowly opened his arms, it was like watching two birds extend their wings.

The velvet parted, sliding off his lady. She was naked, white as cream, her fiery hair draped over her shoulders and arms and matching the flame curls between her legs. Her head lay back, relaxed, fitting perfectly into the point between his jaw and shoulder.

Namir's smile was at its most potent. He'd dropped all control of his true character, allowing himself his rightful power for this evening. His every move, every word, was an invitation to pleasure. He permitted it to flow from him as he tempted Nya. "Ahhh.. and so she does return, my sweet witch. You were right." He held out a hand to Nya. "Join us. My Gift wishes to be shared with you this sacred night, my young pet. Will you honor her offering?"

Gone was the thought of what she must do. For a moment it was as if Nya had in fact been given a gift, absolution for all her mistakes, imagined or otherwise. The incoherent rage and episodes of confusion that kept her head pounding so much of

the time slunk away before the desire she had kept banked. Nya had felt it from the first moment of meeting them, two months before. It was a yearning that was not only physical, but oddly spiritual, and it overrode all feeble objections and propelled her forward eagerly.

Nya dropped to her knees before the woman and lay one slim hand on her calf, spreading out her fingers and watching her hand in wonder as she slid it onto that expanse of pale thigh, feeling and tracing the muscles and skin. Inch by inch, savoring the sensation, she slid her hand back and up, tracing the indentation between thigh and buttock, then trailed her fingertips down, back to the tender skin behind the knee.

She was not skilled or experienced, her fingers more boyish than womanly, but she wanted, needed, and she let that hungry yearning guide her. She rose to her knees and cupped full breasts with their fragile network of blue veins. She slid one arm around the woman's waist, her knuckles brushing the man's hard stomach behind her. The flame-haired woman was tiny, but all curves, like the earth herself. Nya did not tighten her grip to pull the woman closer to her; the flame-haired

woman belonged to him, and so Nya brought her body closer instead and then devoured, sucking the left breast first, drawing the nipple deeply into her mouth, covering the aureole with moist lips and suckling greedily, getting the full tart flavor of it, warm and alive, coated with the light dampness caused by the warm torchlight and the closeness of her lover's body. She reveled in the feel of his hand touching her cap of hair, stroking gently.

She knew when they had danced around the fire together in joyous, childlike abandon that she had wanted Maeve as much as she wanted Namir. She had wanted to collapse on the warm earth, roll childlike with the two of them, and yet feel them beneath her as well as over her, as if Nya were both man and woman, intending to ravish and plunder as well as be consumed.

She wanted to put her mouth inside Maeve; that must be wrong, mustn't it? But she was doing it, working her way down Maeve's soft belly, inhaling the musky aroused scent beneath the flame curls as Maeve responded with a moan, her arms now curled around Namir's neck. He had thrown off the cloak, so now his hands were free

to fondle his lady's breasts as Nya delicately traced Maeve's swollen lips, feeling with amazement their quivering, glistening response. Maeve sighed as Namir's clever fingers cupped and pinched her tight, hard nipples, and his pressure drove her hips forward, making it easy for Nya to dare. She gently eased her tongue between those lips, and closed her eyes at the pleasurable fountain of response she found there. Maeve cried out, but kept her arms around Namir as if locked there, the two of them like gentle jailers having their way with their voluptuous prisoner while she begged for release.

Nya dug her fingers into Maeve's soft buttocks to hold her tighter against her mouth, getting more demanding in her strokes, yearning to drive her to something, to some point of irrationality she sensed getting closer in the more frenetic movement of her hips, some point she was sure would be an explosion of magic reflecting the spirit of this night, when healing and redemption might be possible. She was mewling against the slick skin, and her beast was rising, but like a cool, caressing touch, she felt Namir reach inside her, steady her so the human hunger balanced the animal. Her fingers increased their pressure,

opening Maeve up further, and a moment later Maeve let out a guttural noise of pleasure as Namir thrust into her backside, sending a quake of reaction through her tissues all the way to Nya's tongue. Maeve exploded as Nya had sensed, her fingernails digging into Namir's neck, her body fairly lifting off the ground with the violent rhythm of her hips against the ministrations of Nya's mouth, and the strength of Namir's strokes.

Nya hung on, her own arousal trickling over her bare calves from where the rhythm was rubbing her against the backs of her calves. Maeve's voice was music and Nya shuddered with her, sucking her vibrating clit until the red haired woman collapsed limply against Namir and they sank to the ground with Nya. He had found his own pleasure while Maeve found hers, and now he reached out and pushed Nya's damp hair from her forehead. She nestled her chin in his hand, hoping his touch would linger, and it did, for a moment.

"You have served us well, little one. I am glad you came to us tonight. Perhaps we need to serve you."

Namir trailed his hand along Nya's face, across her shoulder and down to cup her small, tight

breast. Her nipple tightened and rose as his fingers stroked her, sending a shudder through her. Unfamiliar feelings shot through her, causing her to arch under his attentions, her mind relinquishing control of her body to him without so much as a murmur of protest. Maeve rolled over to face her and took Nya's face between her soft hands. Her lips found Nya's and gently drew her into a lingering kiss. The young girl found herself grasping Maeve's shoulders with needy, desperate fingers, seeking to prolong the feeling that mere touch of lips and tongue sent spiraling through her body.

Maeve smiled and pressed against Nya, laying her on her back. The witch pressed the length of her full curves against younger flesh. Her thigh straddled Nya's, pushing her legs apart as her hand slipped down to trace delicate patterns through curls. Then her touch became even more intimate, her fingertips parting Nya's labia.

What followed was something that Nya could not grasp with any words, an overwhelming sensation of being swept into a delicious oblivion. Hands explored every inch of her, mouths seemed to consume her entire body. She could not tell where

she began and ended. The feel of sweet soft lips drinking from her mouth and from between her parted legs, until lightning ripped through her body. It frightened her with its power and yet she never wanted the sensation to end, or her connection to the two who caused it to fade.

When the powerful ripplings eased, none of them spoke. There were just soft caresses, incoherent murmurs, the dream-like passing of time. Nya dozed, wrapped in arms and held closely between two other bodies. Maeve and Namir loved each other so much, and she felt immersed in that love. Safe for the first time in her life.

Time passed, and the dawn light began to seep into the sky, pushing back the magic of the night. The elements fell into place - the lack of protection, guards down, the relative isolation of the three of them. The trigger activated, and Nya's eyes snapped open. She remembered what she was here to do.

During the night, they had shifted, and now Nya lay on the outside, her bare spine pressed against a point of Maeve's, her hip against her rounded backside as the lovely lady lay facing Namir, ensconced in his arms.

Nya sorted through her thoughts. She had immersed herself in the character; that was normal. What she had experienced had not been so mundane. Though the self-hypnosis worked well, she had never so completely lost herself as she had done this past night. Or maybe she hadn't lost herself at all. Maybe she had not been playing a part at all.

Her legs drew up against herself so she formed a fetal ball, the age old posture of self-comfort, and she recognized it as such, an alarming display of weakness. ARM had warned her of this, that getting close to them, their magic and beauty, would make her believe that those who lived off the blood of others did not need to die, but she hadn't expected this.

The mists came, obscuring the ARM mantra, and she remembered. She had gotten lost, destroyed by their deaths, wandering with no direction. She wanted to fight side by side again with those who swore to fight evil and corruption and demons.

No! She shook her head. It was more of the confusion, returning as the magic of the night was receding. It was as Cassius had implied, they were doing it to her, influencing her mind with sex and

magic. She was powerful. She was Loyalty and Duty. That was her religion, her way of life, and she would honor it.

The symbol of Cassius's cell, the Pendragon, all its motifs those of the Knights of the Round Table, had called to her from the beginning. ARM said it was her destiny to kill this most powerful vampire. The Knights of the Round Table had the purest motives, the bravest hearts. They were bound to each other by their love for one another and to the Land, a brotherhood/sisterhood that would serve through the ages.

So why, when she lay here now, did she feel as if she were mocking everything they were, that Cassius had simply stolen the images and did not know, as she knew, what they really meant.

By ARM standards, what she had just done with this woman and man was as far from purity and morals as could be imagined, so why had it felt like a more religious experience than anything she had ever felt in a church?

Namir had slid into that daylight sleep of the vampire, but he was old and powerful enough not to do so. He was comfortable, at ease, trusting the two women, and the thought was like a branding

iron plunged against the soft tissue of her brain, the pain trying to block the trigger. Trust, defenses down, that was always the trigger she buried in her subconscious; when those conditions existed was when the motive came back to the forefront. With supernaturals, the reaction had to be swift, because it would be detected quickly. No time to get lost in a morass of emotions. She was lying next to an empath, a sleeping one, but Nya's intent would invade her dreams like a nightmare. Even though they weren't touching, the heat of their bodies mingled.

Enough. She was crying. The vampire and his witch were doing this to her. Nya forced the emotions aside, centered herself to do what needed to be done with the uncanny discipline she had always had. She reached under her discarded tunic, slowly drew the small wooden eating dagger from the scabbard. She pulled it in close to her body and then casually turned.

This is wrong. WRONG. WRONG. They are your lord and lady. You must NOT do this.

It was screaming in her head and Nya fought it for the evil spell of magic it must be as she quietly, effortlessly as smoke, lifted herself to the balls of

her feet, took the dagger in both hands and positioned herself. She did not give herself a moment more to think. The dagger dove downward, toward the vampire's chest.

She felt it as the blade moved in its lightning descent, his awareness of some danger, communicating itself to Maeve. That split second of disorientation, processing the data, and then his energy slammed into her, knocking off her aim. Maeve reacted with only love guiding her in her groggy state. She threw herself over his chest.

If Maeve had been trained as Nya had been, she would have flung herself up, knocking her off balance. It was what Nya would have done. But instead she protected her lover selflessly, foolishly. Nya stumbled over them, overwhelmed by the power of Namir's defensive reaction, but his power faltered for a moment as her dagger found a mark. Not the intended mark, but Maeve's white skin.

No! The voice screamed in Nya's head.

Maeve cried out his name and he struggled up, holding her to him, trying to get his bearings as Nya staggered back from them. His eyes snapped up to her and agony exploded in her heart.

Her brain slammed into survival mode, kicked everything else out, and she was away from the cave, not looking back, sealing off the moment, the anguish tearing at her shields, the yowl of her beast shrieking in her heart. No, she couldn't lose control and shift. She would die here if she did, run to earth by the lionesses who would be coming to Namir's aid, perhaps even now.

She could hear the howl of Namir's rage and his bellowed orders ringing in her ears as she ran. Her training advanced into high gear, evade...escape...run.

Nya plunged through the woods, the sounds of pursuit fading behind her.

The cave was close to the water, and she plunged into the frigid waves, headed straight out where her scent would be lost. It cooled the beast as well, and helped her regain control. She was a creature of the marshes and waters, of the islands, and knew at dawn, the lobstermen would be headed out, as would the sport fishermen in their cruisers to go deep sea fishing, cruising close enough to see the picturesque iron-veined rocks of the islands. If her body, fortified from the cold by its lycanthropy, could reach one before her body

went numb in the frigid Maine waters, she would seize onto the transom and make like someone whose jon boat went down from getting too close to the craggy islands and got holed by jagged rock. Otherwise she would drown, but that was preferable to being torn apart by cats.

Namir would be delayed only a moment or two, but that was considerable for him. He would summon some of his pride to him before dispatching them after her. Maeve would be his priority. As she should be. It choked Nya, the scream of the witch echoing in her head and blinding her senses so that she could not even think where the blade had landed, whether she had struck fatally or not. She had failed. Failed. But strangely she did not think of it as her failure to kill Namir. She had just betrayed them...again.

She was overwhelmed by simple despair, and the odd realization that this scene would keep happening again and again, until she could find them and know who they were before she was deceived by those who kept using her. They wanted to keep the King from wielding the sword again, and she had once again served their

purposes, unless by some miracle she had missed the heart or Namir could heal Maeve. A king-killing, Cassius had said. Well, if Nya had killed the woman, their mission had succeeded. By destroying Namir's heart, she had destroyed the King in him.

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Nya Post 6 – Morning After – A New Resolve

Characters: Nya

Writer: Joey

Time: August 2

Location: Mainland Forest, Port Hope

Mentions: Namir, Maeve

When she woke, she was in the mainland forest, close to home, and staring into the glassy eyes of a decapitated rabbit. Nya struggled up, fighting the lingering effects of the Change, and saw that the head was practically all that remained of her kill. She had gorged herself with frenetic energy, as if knowing she might need it. But it was just past mid-morning.

Namir had summoned his cats to his aid only minutes after she plunged into the water. She

remembered gold and green glittering eyes, searching for her, coming close to the water's edge as the tide drew her out into the gray dawn. She had Shifted in the water, her cat complaining bitterly about the wet environment, but she was far enough out that the movement of the swells camouflaged her tiny body and disguised the complaint. She had trembled at the snarls exchanged, the moonlight glittering off exposed fangs, knowing the lionesses would tear that small body to pieces. Her Nya part fought the frightened cat, almost wanting to reveal herself, let it be over, but the ocelot's instinct for survival took over and she drifted away with the current.

Her cat and Fate saved her, for even with her advanced training, in her unbalanced state she would not have had the ability to scramble onto the transom of the idly trundling sport fishermen, and hunker down, wet and miserable, managing to cling there. Fortune had been on her side when the captain of the vessel swore, realizing he'd left his cooler on the dock, and spun about to speed back in to the mainland and retrieve his day's supply of beer.

Nya struggled to her feet, wiping the heel of her

hand in the leaves to remove the blood of the rabbit. She wasn't far from home, from clothes that would again turn her into boy or woman, as need demanded. A warmth prickled across her skin as she remembered Maeve under her hands and mouth, Namir's light, caressing touch. Just the memory made her body respond in the same odd, moist way it had last night.

She shook it out of her head. Cassius would be waiting for her report. Each time she returned from a mission, where she took a life, or gathered information, he sent her to the cold stone chapel above where they met after she gave her report. He would order her to stay on her knees on the stones, not squatting to her heels or bent over, but upright, so that after several hours her back and thighs were screaming for release. It was necessary, so she would never forget, never indulge in any pride for succeeding at a mission. She had never failed any orders. Until possibly now.

Nya stumbled over a root. She saw Namir and Maeve again, layered in her memory, the people they were now, but in courtly dress, turning to her from a stone table, speaking, Maeve's soft hand

touching her.him, then her eyes following another, too often it seemed, another knight. It gave Nya a shade of tight foreboding, which eased as Maeve's eyes turned back to the king...Namir, filled with devotion and love.

Another memory, this one driving Nya to her knees in the dirt. She saw Namir,.the king, in armor. The air was hot with blood and fire, and then Nya screamed, her voice harsh and deep, a man's voice, as she saw Arthur's son bring his weapon down on the king's helm, even as Arthur...Namir...drove his lance into the son's chest. Nya saw Arthur fall, and s/he was shouting his rage and pain, tearing through his enemies, trying to regain the place at his lord's side...too late. He had failed them both, failed to protect them both. He was ashamed that he should live while his king died...but Arthur would not let him die at his side. One more task to do...The Sword.

The moment she had driven the knife into Maeve and met Namir's horrified gaze flashed through Nya's mind, obscuring the past. Nya surged up out of the memories, sobbing. It was always one more task, one more thing to do. It kept her alive and

moving, as well as bringing her to the brink of madness, time and time again in these debilitating fits of confusion.

She hated ARM, hated her parents, hated their God, hated them all. The power of the rage surged up in her, knocking aside a lifetime of discipline and consuming her in its blaze of purifying fire. She stood, exposed, naked in the forest, her fists clenched, head thrown back, and a feral yowl ripped from her throat. It was the rage of the cat, but it was her rage, too, and she vented it now, venting her fury and helplessness, screaming with the ferocity of a wild animal, daring herself to be found, knowing she would not because this was her destiny, her decision to make.

Had she thought this mission was her first failure? As if the sun rising on the water shed harsh light on the truth of her existence, she realized that, if Maeve lived, this "failure" would be perhaps the only victory she had ever won.

The trigger had been sprung, there was no mind programming now. She was just Nya, a warrior with an empty heart and soul, standing in the forest and facing herself. A lifetime of discipline

had taught her to look at all things as they were, never embellishing, never indulging. Now she saw what had to be done. She had mistaken her duty and she must answer for that. She would pay the debt that was owed.

There was only one punishment fitting for it, and, while it should be his right, she knew his heart...remembered his heart, enough to know he might not be able to do it.

So she must make him do it.

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Nya Post 7 – A Visit to Cassius

Characters: Nya, Cassius (NPC), Talon (NPC)

Writer(s): Joey

Time: August 2

Location: Abandoned stone chapel in wooded area outside Port Hope - ARM cell hideaway

Mentions: Namir, Maeve

The ARM cell to which Nya belonged consisted almost entirely of ARM members who had voluntarily allowed themselves to be infected with lycanthropy or changed to vampires to serve the cause. Their existence was known only to a

few of the Inner Circle, and they were kept separate. She came here to give her reports on her missions and to be chained when the moon was full. Cassius was leader of the cell, one of the first who had agreed to succumb to the virus for the good of ARM, to give them an edge, permanently sentencing himself to being a freakish monster.

When she first came to them, he told her control would be difficult, taught her what things to avoid, but how to be prepared for it if it happened. While he had succumbed to the virus to serve God and humanity and so would be forgiven his monstrosity, her sins had brought the infection upon herself, so he had told her she must dedicate herself totally to the purpose of ARM, never thinking of herself, never indulging a moment of pleasure, spending her life paying for her sins.

They were based in an abandoned stone chapel by an old cemetery, deep in the woods outside Port Hope. Before she went there to have her audience with Cassius, she stopped at home to change. Cassius preferred her to dress as a nubile young woman when in his presence, rather than as a warrior or teenage boy. He told her over and over it was to warn her that woman was essentially a

weak creature, subject to her hormones, especially one with her youth. She wore one of the outfits he felt was particularly representative of sin, blue cire pants that hugged her groin, ass and legs, outlining everything under it clearly because she wore no underwear, as he preferred, and a beaten silver belt that rode low on her hips, with a stretch croptop that exposed her stomach and navel, the fabric clinging to her small breasts.

He dressed her as a whore, according to her father's standards, but he never used her, or allowed any of the other Changed cell members to do so, though it was permitted, justified by the need to keep a rein on the baser urges of the beast. Cassius claimed that her power to serve them lay in her uncorrupted innocence. She had stood hip deep in blood, but because some man's organ had never pierced her body, she was an innocent. An unfamiliar expression curled her lip and she held it for a moment as she stood outside the stone chapel, amazed with the unexpected feel of a sneer stretching her face. An emotion of anger. Of hate.

Nya wiped it away as she came into his presence, and knelt. At his bidding, she rose and presented

her throat to him.

Cassius studied her with his shrewd eyes. She was blank, the perfect chameleon. She was his loyal agent, his weapon of destruction in a package that looked like it should be skipping off to grade school in a short plaid skirt and bobby socks. Until you looked at her eyes. Those dark eyes that were older than time. Did she have any idea what an old soul she was? He had worried that the lycanthropy would eventually unleash her knowledge of it, destroy the innocence that kept her so ignorant, and so useful.

"I failed you, Cassius," she kept her chin up, his teeth hovering just a moment from her throat. "I wounded the Fey witch, perhaps fatally, but the target is untouched."

His body stiffened in the chair beneath her. He liked her to straddle him when she gave her reports, and present her throat to him as she had done promptly upon his beckoning. His fingers, curled on her buttocks, tightened, bruising. "You were to draw him away from her."

"I tried, but they would not be separated."

He snarled and shoved her off his lap. She fell and

rolled, came to one knee, her head bowed, facing him. "You should have waited, then. He will be far more vigilant now. We have lost time!!"

"But not progress," his second-in-command, Talon, stood against the wall, observing. "If she indeed killed the witch, she's nearly destroyed him, for a time. He will be weak, distraught. He will make mistakes."

"I wish to make amends, just lords," Nya murmured.

"How can you make amends? He won't let you near him!" Cassius kicked her, imagining the Inner Circle's wrath.

"He will if I go to him and offer him my life. Is it not true, that in a rage, a vampire, even one as civilized as Lord Namir, would want to kill with his bite, my lords? What if the meat is poisoned into which he tears?"

Cassius stopped, turned. Nya saw his feet approach her, felt the heat of his fury subside, though his grip was still painful as he buried his fingers in her hair and yanked up her head so he could study her eyes. "You would do this. You would sacrifice your life."

"I have failed," she said simply. "And failure will not be tolerated."

His touch became almost gentle, stroking through her short hair, a tender caress that almost undid her focused shields in a way his violence never could, because a caressing touch had awakened her woman's body. Namir and Maeve had done that to her. She lashed her response down with brutal ferocity and kept her gaze on his, blinking, open.

"I never knew what a treasure I discovered when I found you on my doorstep, naked and ashamed, fleeing the police, the stench of your mother's blood on your breath. You've never questioned your service, sweet Nya, or your punishments. You know your place in life. I shall miss you." He nodded. "I like your idea. Namir and his Alhambra are far too popular with many humans. We must help them see the error of their ways, and his death will be a significant step in that direction."

She waited. "Very well," he stepped back after studying her a moment more. "Do as you say you will do. If you do not succeed, I expect you will be dead. If you fail, and live," his eyes narrowed,

glittered, "It will not be for long. Now, go up to the chapel, and wait for me."

* * *

He beat her of course. "You have failed because of pride," Cassius admonished, bringing the silver-tipped flogger down on her bare back. The stones of the chapel floor cut into her bare breasts and belly. "You have never failed before. You must stay here until day end, to repent your failings."

Midnight. That was not so long, and it would give her time to think. Nya felt the cut of the flogger, felt it take flesh off her shoulders, and her tears trickled between the flagstones, lost in the earth beneath, but she did not cry out. The strikes would leave scars, as it had before, but he never did it long enough to incapacitate her much, and because she was a cat, they healed fast.

He chained her arms and legs to the silver manacles built in the flagstones, his own hands in gloves, binding her facedown before the altar, spread-eagled, naked, cold and bleeding.

"Repent your sins, little girl," he said, as he left her. "Think of how you will make restitution."

She had already thought of that. Now she just had to endure the pain and wait for the right moment to do it.

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Nya Post 8 – A Visit to A Witch

Characters: Nya, The Witch (NPC)

Writer: Joey

Time: August 3

Location: A swamp outside Port Hope

When she left Cassius at midnight, she stopped by her home, then drove her motorcycle to the outskirts of Port Hope. She turned off on one of the side roads that ran along the marshes, and took a boat through them, to a cabin deep in the marsh, where a woman stood on the porch, waiting.

"I felt you coming, little one," the woman said, staring at her through gray cataracts. "What you want is a dangerous thing. You gonna pay me so I don't get no bad juju from this?"

Nya nodded, not questioning how this woman she had never met, knew why she was there. Since she had become a lycanthrope, she had discovered there were many, many things that supernaturals

and the human magic users knew that mundane humans did not. She knew of the woman from her intelligence gathering on other missions, knew she was one ARM intended to eventually have killed, a drowning accident in the marshes where she lived alone. If the woman, who had never met her, had known to be outside for her arrival, knew what she was there for, she suspected ARM would not find her as easy a target as they expected. At least she would not be Nya's target. No one would be, ever again.

She handed over the bag of money, most of what she had, expense money for missions, for basic food supplies given to her at times by ARM. The woman weighed it, wet her lips.

"Speak what it is you want, girl, so those listening know it is your wish."

"I want a soulcatcher, and a blood poison. One that will kill a vampire, slow and painful, once the vampire's drunk of it. It should be able to kill a human, too."

"Only poison like dat, kill the person who drink it, whether the vampire drink his blood or no."
The old woman nodded, and a smile flashed across her round face, pleasant as oozing pus.

"Instant karma, dat, eh? Dat what you want, dat what you get. You paid enough, little girl. You paid more than enough."

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Nya Post 9 – A Shoulder Graze

Characters: Nya

Writer: Joey

Time: Mid-December

Location: Nya's Home

So she returned to her home, and waited. ARM would not call for her again. They would assume she was waiting for the correct time to strike, would wait to see if she succeeded in her task. She did some intelligence work and learned Maeve lived, that her blow had done little more than graze the woman's shoulder, painful but nothing close to life threatening. As a warrior, she should have been ashamed at her ineffectiveness. Alone in the place in the marsh she had made her hideaway, unknown to ARM, she wept tears of relief.

The moon came, and she chained herself up as ARM always did, refusing the cat the freedom to

run, though this time it tore at her soul in a way it had never done before. It was as if, by turning her back on ARM, she had embraced that part of her, brought it more into her soul. She imagined she could hear the others calling to her, calling her to rejoin them, run with her sisters and brothers again, but she knew it was the hallucination of the moon, for they could only want her dead for trying to kill their lord.

Then she heard Maeve had left to pursue a quest in the Fey world, and she knew the time had come, knew that Cassius would also know. With Maeve there, Namir might have been softer, more moved to compassion, and she wanted his full wrath, craved it not so much for redemption as for the end it would bring. She would suffer, she was certain, she deserved that, but she would no longer be used, and that was a far worse torture than what she would offer to him to inflict upon her.

She dressed as a virginal harlot for Cassius, an average-looking teenage boy for many of her missions. She sensed she must do something different to appear before Namir. She must appear before him as the warrior she was, take his

punishment as herself.

She wore the black body suit that stretched tight over her frame and gave her supple body unencumbered movement. She put the 9mm in the shoulder harness. The two silver knives layered on her right wrist sheaths balanced the folding miniature crossbow on her left. She shrugged into a loose, ankle length duster, not intending to wear it long, but it would get her through traffic without police notice of the illegal weaponry. The semi- automatic she packed in her saddle bag and would put into her outer thigh holster once she reached her destination. The she picked up the soulcatcher bottle, the vial of poison, and left the dilapidated shack behind.

There was nothing in it that made it home. It was a barracks, a place to hide, to be safe. She turned her back on it and went toward death.

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Nya Post 10 – Is Namir Home?

Characters: Michael, Nya

Writer: Joey

Time: Mid-December

Location: Alhambra

Nya took her boat to the island of the Alhambra, passing under the bridge and then pulling onto the beach. The wards detected her immediately, but the bridge security guards could see her clearly. She was not hiding. She strode casually toward the tense security contingent that descended upon the beach as soon as she was disembarking.

There was a man with them, with the face of a British aristocratic rakehell and the body of a god. He was not wearing the uniform of the security contingent, but a cream colored shirt that appeared handmade and perfectly tailored slacks, as if he had joined up with them from an office when the alarm was given. He had fair, flowing hair caught back in a loose careless tail, the gray eyes intelligent, probing, not entirely arrogant. He was also a vamp. He was powerful, perhaps a Master, and she fought her own beast's instinctive need to shift her eyes away as he approached, acknowledging his dominance. He was leading the group.

She dropped to one knee briefly, recognizing a show of respect might be useful, but then immediately rose.

"I've come to see Lord Namir," she repeated, raising her eyes and meeting his briefly, enough to let him know she was being polite, not cowed. There was only one to whom she would submit.

"Indeed?" Michael raised an eyebrow. She was lycanthrope, a young kitten, and yet she was carrying enough silver on her to massacre a pack. He noted the semi-automatic strapped on her thigh, followed it across a pair of nicely outlined small breasts to the shoulder holster revealed by the open coat.

"Perhaps you'd better disarm first, and tell me what your business is with the Master of Alhambra. He's not in the best of moods." The weaponry looked heavier than she did, but her tight mouth and disciplined tension suggested she had never smiled. Not once.

Nya straightened, advanced a step under his watchful eyes, the wind shifting with her, bringing her scent to them.

"It's her! The one who tried to kill Maeve!" That came from one of the pride, a beautiful lioness in human form that Nya had immediately recognized from her scent as one who had joined the pursuit the fateful night at the forest preserve.

They were quick, but she was quicker. The semi-automatic came out of her holster and the small cross bow shot from her sleeve, cocked with three silver tipped arrows and drawn back to fire.

"The gun is loaded with silver," she said flatly, focused entirely on her task to let them know she had no fear. "The crossbow goes without saying. I'm here to see Lord Namir. I am not here to hurt him, but I will surrender only to him."

Michael held up a steadying hand to the others, all amusement gone from his narrowed eyes. "I asked you, little one, what is your business with him? And regardless of whether or not that audience is granted, you will not be permitted to see him armed. I suggest, if you want the whisper of a chance of seeing him, you stand down."

Nya looked at him, at the cold eyes, measuring her, measuring her intent, and felt an inappropriately-timed warm shiver that strangely recalled her reaction when she met Carlos earlier. She squared her shoulders, ignored her cat's raging hormones, and dropped the gun with a thunk to the sand. She removed the soulcatcher bottle and vial of poison from the coat, shrugged off the duster.

She then proceeded to silently strip off her weaponry, until she was down to the body suit and her boots. And a small switchblade in the left one. She wasn't completely a fool.

When she was done, she straightened, picked up the bottle and vial, and extended them to him. Michael took them carefully. Her eyes never wavered from his.

"You have my weapons. The vial is a blood poison. I offer to take it in Lord Namir's presence, so he may watch me die a slow, agonizing death, an hour to every minute I made his lady suffer. He should not use his fangs to cause me more pain once I take it, because it is death to a vampire. The bottle is bespelled to catch my soul when it leaves my body so I may never incarnate. I will remain his prisoner forever. Such is the fate I deserve. I will wait here until he decides what he desires."

With that, she dropped to her knees before the silent group of weres, bowed her head, and prepared to wait.

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Nya Free Post – A Trip to Koreander's

Writer: Mark and Joey

Characters: Koreander, Bastet, Nya and Carlos

Mentions: Michael, Namir, Maeve

Location: Koreander's Rare Books

Nya hesitated, awkward as Carlos held her back, opened the door and gestured her to precede him. The chimes of the bell and warmth, the smell of exotic coffee and the faint aura of chocolate, swept over her. Some of the miserable uncertainty receded, and her mundane senses accepted it as evidence that her surroundings were harmless, rather than recognizing anything erected in the store might be affecting her. Her cat sensed something else. Feline, and more than feline.

Nya's gaze went left, where a black cat blinked at her, lazing upon a stack of books. The indolence contrasted oddly with the startling penetration of her brilliant green eyes. Her gaze had an intensity unusual for an ordinary house cat.

A flood of irate disdain filled her mind. Nya stepped back at the indignant thought that invaded her mind too abruptly to be her own imagination.

*What do you mean, *ordinary* house cat? The*

last one to suggest that is now a stone statue in Cairo.

This less-than-loving interchange was interrupted by a musical baritone with a defined English trill.

"Bastet! Please address our guests with a little more respect. And the less said about Cairo, the better."

Nya turned at the abrupt sound of the voice, sketching a rough martial arts defensive stance. But well out of attack range was a tall Englishman in a three-piece tweed suit and tinted glasses. The smile under the walrus moustache was warm and sincere, and his green eyes were unnaturally riveting, like his cat's.

"Welcome to Koreander's, miss. Please come in...you are in complete safety in my shop."

Nya met his gaze and was held there for a moment, simply staring at him. The confusion stirred to life, as it had not since she had come to the Alhambra. She knew him, but she had never met him. She shook her head. This was a personal reaction to him. He projected soothing calm, but that calming touch perversely stroked against an old wound within her, a deeply buried anger. It

was a sense of abandonment and betrayal, but at the same time, she did not sense a threat from him.

He seemed to overlook her odd reaction and motioned her to the slightly raised dais at the back of the shop, where the Spanish sideboard supported the sources of that garden of sweet smells she had detected upon entry. Nya noted that he kept a respectful distance and made no attempt to shake hands...one for him.

Since her emotions were all over the chart at this point, she could not rely on the validity of her reaction. So, as a soldier often did, she followed his direction, but, not sure if he was ally or foe, she proceeded with caution. He bid her sit in one of the chairs near the sideboard and while she settled herself, the scholar took two sheets of stiff stationery from the roll-top desk near the hospitality area and set them on a side table. Then he went to the sideboard.

"The coffee is Arabic, miss. If you spend much time at the Alhambra, it is a taste to cultivate, I think. The biscuits are completely American." He presented her with an undersized cup to hold the very strong brew. A china plate with two

oversized chocolate chip cookies, still warm, he set on the table beside her.

Koreander sat down in one of the overstuffed armchairs, and took up the sheets of stationery. Nya could see the writing, but it was the gentle swirls and buttonhooks of Arabic script. He appeared to be indulging in a re-reading of the document before continuing their conversation, so she sat on the edge of the chair and schooled herself to patient immobility, as she had been taught.

The warm chocolate chip cookies were making her fingertips itch. Nya deliberately laid her palm flat on the side table's smooth surface next to the gold rimmed saucer, underscoring her resolve to refuse. She had resisted every exotic confection the postulants tried to foist upon her at the Alhambra; a pair of homemade chocolate chip cookies should not be tugging at her mind so, but there it was. She had to stop dwelling on such things, remember the rules she had learned about allowing emotions to pass through her untouched and unexplored. Things that elicited desire always must be treated so, or one grew weak. Inexplicably, her night with Maeve and Namir

went through her mind, causing an embarrassing flush to rise. She flicked a glance toward Carlos, rummaging through one of the nearby shelves, and his sidelong, amused glance told her that his werecat senses had picked up the direction of her thoughts. She resisted the urge to hiss at him.

Koreander, on the other hand, smiled. "Good afternoon, Carlos. The Casteneda I mentioned to you is on the third shelf center."

But the smell. Perhaps it was that feeling of comfort that seemed to be closing in on her, allowing her no choice but to settle uneasily into its embrace. For a bare moment, her eyes almost closed and she took in the aroma through her nose. It reached into her unguarded mind and raised a forgotten memory.

Helen Jamieson had invited Nya to come to her house after school. Nya went because her father ordered her to do so. He did not normally permit her to be with children other than those in training in the camp, but he explained it was another facet to her lessons.

"Not all who claim to be Christians have the discipline to take up arms against evil. To avoid becoming one of them, you must understand their

weaknesses."

It was the only direction he had given her for her conduct. She had knocked on Helen's door, and for two hours, she had been pulled into a world where little girls in fourth grade had posters of teen stars and rock bands on their walls, where the mother was soft and curved like a fistful of cotton and smelled like peach lotion. Nya knew, because when Helen brought her to the kitchen, Mrs. Jamieson put an arm around both girls, one arm for each comfortably padded hip, and hugged them to her. It felt odd, and Nya had stood stockstill, leaning into the pressure of the broad hand with sparkling rings on it. She cautiously copied Helen when the other girl put her head down against her mother's side, her forehead pressed against the side of a squishy breast, and wrapped her arms around Mrs. Jamieson's ample waist. Mrs. Jamieson chattered at them and asked silly, pointless questions, like did she have a good day and was anybody in the class her special friend.

Then Mrs. Jamieson had gently freed herself from both girls and pulled a sheet of chocolate chip cookies from the oven, helping Nya identify the

wonderful aroma that had been making her mouth do unusual things. Mrs. Jamieson sat her down with a plateful, and she and Helen ate until there were no more, and Nya felt sick and sleepy, but not uncomfortable.

When she came home, her father made her tell him everything she felt, did and said. He explained all the weaknesses, and gave her ten lashes on her bare back with his belt buckle for each one she had not taken care to avoid. Mrs. Jamieson's hug and those cookies had earned her twenty lashes each, for they were the worst weaknesses of all.

Nya snapped back to the present as Bastet leaped lightly onto the desk and sat, hooking her tail around her perfectly groomed feet. She eyed Nya from the other side of the cookie plate.

There's a difference between being finicky and being rude. Alley cat.

Nya's eyes narrowed to slits. Perhaps it was the childish memory pressing so close to her, along with the smell of those cookies& Helen sticking her tongue out of her sticky mouth in fun, and Nya saying she looked like a dog that had put its face

in a mud puddle.

Takes one to know one.

Bastet turned her back, leading with her nose, and placed her tail in the center of the plate. With one economical lash of her tail, she spun a cookie off the plate and thumped it into Nya's lap.

"Bastet, for heaven's sake! Have you forgotten that a guest is a jewel seated on the cushion of hospitality. It seems to me that someone got up on the wrong side of HER cushion..." He turned to Nya.

"Namir Pasha writes to say many things. He must think a great deal of you to send me such a long letter. He tells me that he is re-introducing you to the world, and I will be delighted to help if I may."
"

A sharp, very knowing expression gripped Koreander's visage, making him seem incalculably older. "But before we discuss literature, I have a question. Namir Pasha believes that you see yourself as a warrior. By what right do you pretend to warriorhood?"

Nya's gaze jerked up to him, startled by the sudden stern cast to the penetrating green eyes.

This was a good friend of Lord Namir's and since he had been sent a letter, it stood to reason Michael had been ordered to send her to him. So she owed him the respect she had offered Namir.

"I have trained all my life to fight," she answered, straightening in the chair and putting her hands to her sides in an automatic open position that would block no blow if it was felt to be deserved. It was the cookies. He had seen her weakness and so now questioned her worthiness.

She also sensed that her respect for him was justified, beyond Namir's letter. Whereas she could be motivated by her irritation to say that Michael would have spectacles and a paunch without his vampirism, she could equally state that this man's scholarly demeanor was a handsome frame for a pulsating power source, unable to be masked in his gaze. His eyes delved deep, knew many things, past, present and future.

And there it was again, the sense of betrayal, so ancient but still acute. Not the betrayal of an enemy, but of an ally who had done what was required of him, by his own code. She wanted to hate him for that, but she understood, because deep inside, that code lived in her, breathed in her

still...

The fog of confusion cleared and Koreander sat in his chair, regarding her steadily as if her attention had not wandered, though there was a pain in his eyes that had not been there before. The rest of the store receded to the background and it was just the two of them there, with time ticking away as it always had, and just one moment to act, regret, or change.

Nya struggled with words, emotions, and instead of feeling as if she must push them down, ignore them, or let them float away untouched, she for once felt she must dare to speak what resonated in her heart, mind and soul as truth.

"I am a warrior," she said softly. "It is everything I am, everything I have been. I have sought and craved nothing but to serve the right master. For him, or her, I will be whatever they need me to be, protect them with all that I am."

The mystic nodded, all understanding. He reached to his desk for a book.

"This is the Book of Five Rings, by the immortal Musashi. HE was a warrior. Being a fighter is not even close to enough to suffice as a warrior. In his

Book of the Earth, he admonished the warrior-emergents to become familiar with everything. Not as protective coloration, but to become the kind of integrated individual that could be of best use to the liege lord. He was samurai, meaning 'to serve.'

Nya frowned, but her mind rolled over the words, weighing them, considering their meaning and the truth that seemed to resonate from them like a familiar mantra.

"Likewise," continued the sage, "consider the medieval knight. During his training, he learned courtesy, serving, heraldry, hunting, and much more. Being a fighter is only one layer of what you are. You can not serve my old friend unless you become familiar with every layer you possess."

Then he said nothing, but the tone of the eyes changed, sharpened. There was more, and he was pushing her to go deeper. She hadn't given him the answer he sought on the first round, and it was only something she could pull from inside, not fabricate for his satisfaction. He would know.

So she looked within, dug, and knew where he wanted to go, though only her training in

obedience made her put her hand into that black hole without hesitating, clutch what was within, and pull it forth. No master had ever demanded her to speak of it.

"I've seen a lot of things." It came out as a whisper. Nya looked down at the plate of cookies and for some reason, the sight of them, and of Bastet, now compacted into an egg shape with all feet tucked invisibly beneath her and her eyes half slits, wrenched Nya to the core. The smell of coffee, the gentle murmur of music and other distant patrons were all normal things to which she could never belong.

"I've watched weres tortured to death with silver in basement rooms no one knows about. I've gone into homes in the middle of the night to kill, sometimes quick and clean, and sometimes not, those who worked against... our cause. When they used information and lies to destroy a man's life, they sent me to put a bullet in his brain at the right moment to make it look like suicide, with no questions asked... I've done it over and over... I've forgotten how many I've killed."

That was a lie. She knew them all, every face, all locked in a closet of nightmares in her mind that

she never opened, not even this much, because to do so interfered with the next mission. But there was no more mission, and the door was getting weak, and her nightmares were going to burst free and consume her, as she deserved. She belonged not to heaven or purgatory. She was one of hell's minions, and when that door burst, it would reclaim her.

Bastet caught that thought. *Are you really as ignorant as a dog? You are no hellspawn. Believe me...we know. My master and I have fought more demons than you have claws. He is a Companion of the White Rose, and walks with angels. Don't be a kitten.*

This time, Koreander did not admonish her, but Nya had a brief vision of pushing the cat's head into a vat of soapy dishwater. However, the familiar's words startled her. This man& a warrior. She thought about his warmth, his presence, the sense of power in the shop that even a mundane like herself could feel and knew it to be truth.

He was a warrior. He knew what it was to be one, in a way she did not, for he had made his own choices. She had made no choice, until the day

she stood on a beach, blood on her hands, and renounced what she had been trained to be. She was having to start over, begin again, and learn to face whether or not she was capable of being a warrior. She could fail utterly, and never be more than what she was at this moment, and the desolation of that truth would destroy her.

His eyes felt like brands on her skin. Nya kept staring at the plate, so hard her vision blurred. She was vaguely aware of her fingers, clenched into a fist on her knee. "You're right. I'm not a warrior. I chose the wrong master. I know how to kill, and destroy, that is all. I am an abomination. I do not want to be what I was, but I do not know what I can be, and still serve Lord Namir well."

Carlos laid his fingers on her shoulder, a werecat giving another comfort. When her gaze lifted, she saw Bastet's eyes were insufferably pitying.

Nya surged out of the chair, upsetting the plate onto the floor. Bastet jumped back and arched, startled.

"There is no pity for me," Nya spat. "I watched them die and offered them nothing. I heard their screams when they were tortured and felt no need to help them. They deserve your pity. I deserve

nothing, particularly not these."

She drove her heel viciously down on the pair of cookies. They gave easily, soft as they were, but she attacked them as if they were concrete, twisting and grinding them until crumbs were smeared into the wood of the floor.

It was an incomprehensible, impotent gesture of helpless fury, no better than a child's temper tantrum, and only the years of discipline helped her step outside of herself, recognize it, and yank it back in. By then the damage was done. Nya stared down at the cookies, the memory of Mrs. Jamison's cookies. As she watched, a drop of water splashed beside them, then another. Her fingers fluttered to her face and she found it wet.

"No, miss, that is not true." Koreander's mellow voice crackled with authority now. "You did not choose a master...you were not capable of mature decision. Do you know what you deserve, Mistress Nya? You deserve respect, for surviving a childhood characterized by horror. You deserve the pity that is the gift of gentle and generous hearts. You are entitled to love....I know this because I serve the Author of Light, who is love through and through. You deserve the right to

become yourself...not a series of masks, but the countless facets that make up the wonder that is you. If you deny yourself one iota of who you are, you betray yourself and my friend Namir."

The words were like drops of rain on a parched soul, filling the brittle cracks, swelling the substance, making it press out toward its true, original boundaries, and it swelled that ache within her, increasing the pain to a level that terrified her, she who had sat, unbound, allowing her father to torture her to prove her endurance.

Nya was afraid to look up, afraid to look at Koreander, Carlos, or Bastet. She dropped to her knees. She tried to work the cookie bits out of the cracks of the wood with her short fingernails, fighting the absurd, unabated compulsion to shove the larger bits into her mouth. The mission, didn't she have a mission? Focus on the mission. Focus.

"I'm sup-p-posed - - " she swallowed what felt like glass in her throat, and tried harder to pick up the crumbs, "T-to get a b-book." She swiped at her nose with the back of her hand.

Koreander joined her on her knees. "Here...let me help." In a moment, the job was done. He handed her a subtly monogrammed silk handkerchief.

"Leave the rest...it will provide Bastet some amusement later. I think I know the book for you. You need to discover, I think, that you can change through an act of love, no matter how settled you are in your training."

He stood again and went to the sideboard. There was a small book on it now...strange. Nya was trained to observe, but she did not remember the book being on the sideboard earlier. He picked it up and handed it to her.

The book was GOODBYE, MR. CHIPS, by the colossally underestimated author, James Hilton.

Nya gripped the handkerchief and took the book in her other hand, examining the whimsical cover. It looked like a well-used library book, with the crackling transparent cover, the whimsical picture of the boy and old man on the front, and the paper unevenly cut and gone yellow with age. It was a far different book from the beautiful tooled tomes she saw stacked on the shelves around them.

Koreander was watching, waiting. Nya looked up. "Thank you," she said dutifully, not quite certain how to react to such an incomprehensible offering. "I& if& I don't have any money, and I guess Michael is paying for the storybook,& but I

was wondering if I might borrow the other one you offered and& " she looked back down, worrying the edge of the book with her nail, "One about the knights. One of those,& particularly&" her brow crinkled. "Was there one knight, one with no hand?"

She was not sure where the words came from, how she knew that, but she knew she wanted to read about all the things of which he had spoken, about warriors who fought with codes of honor, who were more than just instruments of death. If she must become this thing, she must understand others who were. If there was one thing Nya knew as a chameleon of the highest order, it was how to study and become someone else. Only this time, she wouldn't be a machine duplicating a personality. She would be creating herself, a real self.

Koreander nodded. "You are thinking of Bedwyr, or Bedevere. An interesting choice...Bedwyr was the acme of loyalty among Arthur's Knights." As he moved to a shelf and removed a book on the Arthurian cycle, he reflected in a flash. Perhaps this soul, now lost but soon to be found, has a part to play with Camelot Redivivus. He presented the

volume with the Book of Five Rings to Nya.

“Well, miss. Why not browse the shop a bit. It may be some time since you’ve been able to browse a bookstore.”

Nya stepped off the dais and surveyed her surroundings. Behind her she heard Koreander engage Carlos in cordial conversation.

“Michael would also appreciate Casteneda, but remind him that we’ve never finished our discussion of C.S. Lewis and his approach to “mere” Christianity...”

The majority of the patrons were wandering among the books on the lower level, so her feline sense as well as her comfort for isolation drew her toward the iron staircase. She clutched her books to her chest and ran her hand along the rail as she turned the spiral, coming around in a circle three times, at a higher level each time, a form that seemed significant and hopeful.

There was a comfortable fabric chair, caddy-corner to the storefront wall and the balcony rail. With a glance right, she could look down at the first level and Koreander's raised dais. If she looked left or straight she looked

down two aisles of books. Aged golden wood flooring beneath her feet, expensive oak panel walls, and the smell of old books all around combined with her high perch and gave her the sense of being in a tree.

She sank down in the chair, not certain why she had wandered up here rather than standing at Carlos's side, communicating her preparedness to depart because her mission was fulfilled. Perhaps because she was not certain it was. She was finding there were many layers to Michael's requests, and he had said she might read the book at her leisure and enjoy the experience. He did not say where.

She did not feel so terrible, though the past hour had certainly not been easy. Something felt different inside of her. She was feeling very tired of a sudden, exhausted in a way she never felt, even when her body gave out from training to the limits of its endurance. She turned to place her books on the mosaic side table and found the undersized cup of Arabic coffee and two more fresh and warm chocolate chip cookies there. The saucer was the same saucer, for a short, black strand of Bastet's hair was still stuck on the rim in

the same spot on which the condensation from the warm biscuits had fastened it when she was downstairs.

She could hear Koreander's voice, drifting up to her, lulling her to sink back into the chair, but she propped her temple against the fabric and looked down, watching him. Bastet had said he had fought demons. But he was so different from her, from anyone she knew who claimed to fight evil. His warmth and openness to others was genuine, but she sensed that he was alert, aware of all that was going on around them, even down to her regard. Confirming it, he looked up at her at that moment and smiled, nodding his head. She heard his thought, reassuring and real.

Look around at your leisure. Add this sense to the things to which you are entitled.

The girl swallowed, settled back in the chair and looked back at the side table a long moment. Deliberately turned her head again toward the balcony. Koreander was now inviting another patron to sit with him. Carlos had moved to one of the fireside chairs, his long legs in the dark, well-fitted slacks crossed. His book was open on his knee and one hand rested on it while he sipped

coffee with the other. His dark hair fell over his forehead and he looked handsome and urbane. He looked up at her and she saw he had chosen a chair with a clear view of her whereabouts. It was strange, but at the moment he felt more protector than guard, and she could not look on him with rancor.

In fact, something very odd moved in her lower belly when he looked up at her and smiled, just a slight curve of the sensuous Latin mouth. His eyes lingered on her in a way that made the odd feeling sweep up through her breasts and tighten them, a reaction she apparently could not control, no matter her attempt to do so. It had been the same the night with Maeve and Namir, his and her touch on them making them change in shape and fullness. Maybe it was a form of magic, like the cookies.

Nya ducked her head and that brought her back to the saucer. Bastet was there, of course. She stepped over the cookies and leaped lightly onto the top of Nya's chair, draping herself across it with the easy grace cats have on impossibly narrow surfaces, and curled and uncurled her tail, irritating Nya's ear.

Even kittens know when it is time to eat. Nothing here will do you harm.

The image of tipping the chair back flashed unbidden through her mind. While she doubted the insufferable creature would give her the satisfaction of yowling and writhing to a thud on the floor below, making the green eyes round like surprised saucers and claws puncture the fabric for purchase might be some measure of comfort.

Be careful what you start, alley cat. I've been a familiar for four lifetimes. Do you feel lucky?

Nya sighed, strangely content with their acerbic interchange and lay her head back on the seat, her skull curved into the soft give of Bastet's belly. She curled her fingers into Koreander's handkerchief, and liked the feel of holding onto something that was temporarily hers. Was that wrong, and weak? She was too tired to puzzle it out. So many strange thoughts. It was okay. She was safe here. Koreander had said so.

With her other hand, Nya slowly reached out. Her hand hovered as she stared at the cookies for a long time, and then she picked one up. She turned it over and over, weighed it in her palm, watched

the melted chips stain the lines of her palm. Cautiously, she brought the biscuit to her nose, smelled it. The aching lump in her throat grew past swallowing, but this time, she opened her mouth and took a bite of the cookie.

The taste flooded her. Sugar, butter, chocolate, and all the indulgence and safety it represented. Now she truly couldn't swallow. Nya reached for the coffee, not particularly caring for the combination, and brought a glass of frothy milk to her mouth instead, startling her so much she almost dropped it.

Bastet moved. Nya turned her head to find the cat had straightened to an upright sitting position and was hung over her like a vulture, her green eyes on the milk. The pink sandpaper tongue brushed the whiskers. If she had had an eyebrow, the reigning feline queen of the bookstore would be raising it expectantly.

She didn't have to give her any, of course. The cat was arrogant, disdainful and annoying.

Nya raised the glass to shoulder height and watched as Bastet lowered her head. A moment before she bent her head to drink, the cat paused, eyed her.

*If you've intentions of dunking my face,
remember that statue, alley cat.*

The afternoon waned into early evening and Carlos stood, stretching as Koreander moved around the shop, making preparations to close. Carlos could still see Nya's arm resting on the chair arm, but the rest of her was hidden by the wingback. He went up the staircase, expecting her to stir at his approach, and was brought up short at the top.

She was asleep, her forehead propped against the flat cushion of the opposite wing. Bastet's paw rested against Nya's cheek, the dark head resting on top of the girl's, the back feet dangling lazily down to her shoulder. The books were still in Nya's lap, the top selection, the James Hilton, opened on Page 37, her finger twitching almost as if she was stroking the words directly beneath her fingers. Carlos approached quietly and craned his neck about to see the sentence.

"She made him, to all appearances, a new man; though most of the newness was really a warming to life of things that were old, imprisoned, and unguessed".

When Carlos raised his gaze, both Nya and Bastet were looking at him out of half-closed, sleepy eyes, both cats poised to be cranky. Carlos bit back a smile and lifted his hand.

"Be still," he said softly, before she could draw back, and he rubbed his thumb over the faint milk moustache on Nya's upper lip.

She studied him as he continued his ministrations. The intentness of her dark eyes stirred him and his gesture became less pragmatic, and more of a caress, stroking the line of her mouth. She turned her head, reacting unconsciously to his rousing touch by parting her lips, and the pad of his thumb touched the moist inner wall of her full bottom lip.

Koreander's light cough made Carlos stop, give Nya a rueful smile she did not understand. The driver rose, and only Bastet heard his thought.

Michael, you do ask the impossible sometimes.

"Time to go home, beautiful little one," Carlos murmured. "Michael's waiting."

Nya rose, clutching the books, and turned to Bastet. She hesitated, reached out and, copying Carlos's gesture, touched her thumb to the cat's

face, brushing off the light pepper crust of milk on the end point of the fine chin hairs.

Good-bye

Farewell kitten. You're beginning to open your eyes. Grow up soon and maybe you could give me a better romp than the other overfed Alhambra cats.

Carlos took her arm and let her precede him down the steps. Koreander waited at the bottom.

Koreander's first words were for Bastet. "One day, Bastet, you're going to say that to the wrong cat." He then turned to Carlos.

"Remember, my friend. Tell my thrice blessed Sita that my sleep is only reverie without her. Each moment away is a moment too long. Send her my love ten thousand times."

Then he turned to Nya. He took her hand, and placed his left on her shoulder, almost in benediction.

"Know, Mistress Nya, that you are always assured a welcome here, no matter how the world turns. Return to the Alhambra and ponder the watchword of Apollo: Know thyself. Walk in

joy.”

THE END

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